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Women W.a.R.P.ing Gender in Comics: Wendy Pini's *Elfquest* as mixed power fantasy

Isabelle L. Guillaume

1 *Elfquest is* a long-running high fantasy comics series by Wendy and Richard Pini, a couple who met through comics letter columns, married in 1972, and proceeded to create comics together for the next 40 years. Although the two of them are credited for *Elfquest*, the series is predominantly Wendy's brainchild: while Richard acts as editor, co-plotter and general facilitator, *she* is the one who actually writes, draws, inks and letters the series[1].

2 In 1978, after facing rejection from publishers large and small, *Elfquest* went on to become a major success in the United States as a self-published comic, blazing the trail of "alternative" productions to come. The series took off spectacularly thanks to its reliance on direct distribution to comics shops. By the 1980s, its estimated sales figures were close to 100.000 copies per issue (Weiner 26).

3 Since then, the publishing history of *Elfquest* has been rather complicated, switching from W.a.R.P. (the couple's imprint, whose name stands for Wendy and Richard Pini) to mainstream publishers like Marvel's Epic, DC Comics, and currently Dark Horse. Thankfully, the entire run up to 2014 is available online for free (albeit in its coloured version, as opposed to the original black and white) on the Pinis' website, *Elfquest.com*, which makes it easily accessible to scholars and new readers[2].

4 *Elfquest*'s reception is something of a paradox. First, in spite of its huge success, the series remains marginalised even among the alternatives. As Wendy Pini puts it, "*Elfquest* is something of a comics industry wallflower, having received only a handful of awards over the years, none major. In a superhero-saturated, male-dominated industry, a pretty fantasy comic written and drawn by a woman was highly suspect." (Fletcher n.p.)

5 But strangely enough, despite its female creator and its wide female audience, *Elfquest* has *also* gone unnoticed by gender studies, probably for analogous reasons: the "prettiness" of

the drawings and the fact that it serves a fantasy narrative addressing young people as well as adults may seem to downplay the subversive potential of the work in the eyes of critics. Indeed, within comics studies, specialists focus mostly on "graphic novels" – highly legitimate productions – or underground comics – subversive texts with an overtly political agenda. In terms of genre, the dominant works are all memoirs (Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*) and/or narratives of trauma, often dealing with gender and sexuality (Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life*), while "minor" genres such as fantasy remain under-represented.

6 In academic writing, *Elfquest* is frequently referenced as one of the earliest successes in self-publishing (Gabilliet 83-84, Lopez 124), with special mention to its large female readership (Weiner 26). The series is even included in Beaty and Weiner's *Heroes and Superheroes*, whose goal is to survey "130 [...] graphic novels and core comics series *that form today's canon*.[3]" However, *Elfquest*'s "canonical" dimension is dubious at best, as there is virtually no academic material focusing specifically on the series. Online searches yield very few results – a couple of academic theses (Kaipainen, Russel), one anecdotal seminar presentation (Brosch), and no published articles. Moreover, these few works are scattered chronologically (1987, 2008, 2015) as well as geographically (one author is Finnish, one is American, the third is German), which attests to the international readership of the series and to its ability to attract new readers in the 21st century, but also shows how scholarly interest in *Elfquest* remains limited, and hinges on personal initiative only.

7 My hypothesis is that *Elfquest's* relative invisibility in academia and the comics world is linked to the Pinis' unusual treatment of gender, which clearly goes against established norms of the American comics market, but is not radical enough to attract gender critics. I suggest reading *Elfquest* as a mixed power fantasy, that is to say a tale whose heroes and heroines invite identification regardless of the reader's gender. This strategy is a way of welcoming women into a traditionally male mode of comics consumption, but without seeking to overthrow traditional conventions coming from that field.

Defining the power fantasy

8 The term "power fantasy" is commonly used to describe a certain type of cultural productions, whose readers are meant to identify with the main character and derive enjoyment out of his or her display of power. When not associated with young children, the term can be disparaging, meant to deride a certain category of readership – usually male teenagers identifying with the character's raw expression of strength. However, some adult readers defend the need for escapism inherent to the power fantasy. Needless to say, superhero comic books are the archetypal power fantasy, designed for a male audience and staging the extraordinary deeds of a manly character.

9 This situation is, of course, evolving rapidly. Over the last decade, thanks to online activism and a rise in public awareness, superhero readership has moved closer to parity and opened up to more women-friendly representations. This is also linked with the rise of female creators operating within the mainstream superhero genre, who re-appropriated the notion of a power fantasy, reminding people in the field that the desire for *empowerment* is largely a female drive too, and can be tapped into in order to create new narratives. In this regard, writer Kelly Sue DeConnick has played a particularly important role in putting forward a more gender-balanced view of superheroes, notably

through her work on *Captain Marvel*. She says : "I'm a five foot tall woman who's always looked like a child; I can teach any man you meet about power fantasy; that is not an inherently masculine trait." (Stotter)

10 However, things were not always so. In the heyday of *Elfquest,* superhero comics attracted mainly boys and men; a survey found that as late as the 1990s, approximately 91% of the readership of DC Comics was male (Draper Carlson). Therefore, my hypothesis is that in such a context, other comics genres were more suited to the expression of other forms of power, which might resonate more strongly with the realities of girls' and women's lives. *Elfquest*, with its diverse cast of characters and its complex narrative which combines high-stakes adventure with ample character development, is indeed a book read by all genders, while still relying on the concept of identification to the characters. Indeed, according to Richard Pini, most readers expressed a desire to "be elves, or be like elves" (Fletcher n.p.), which supports my reading of *Elfquest* as power fantasy.

Plot summary

11 *Elfquest* takes place on the World of the Two Moons, a planet with an indigenous human population, at a stage resembling our own prehistory. But this world is also home to various tribes of elves and trolls, descended from alien ancestors whose spaceship crashed on the planet thousands of years before. This sci-fi premise lays the ground for a high fantasy tale dealing with a group of woodland elves called the Wolfriders, who face the brutality and prejudice of fanatical human tribes. The plot then develops into a quest for knowledge, in which the group departs in search of their lost origins and finds other tribes of elves, discovering new lifestyles and new ways of seeing the world. There is specific emphasis on the individual progress of Cutter, the tribe's chief, as he faces his own challenges as a leader, falls in love, starts a family, and learns to adapt his old ways to a changing world.

12 In other words, the narrative strategies of *Elfquest* are almost diametrically opposed to those of traditional superhero stories. As Eco explains in "The Myth of Superman," a classical superhero story is based on the return to the *statu quo*[4], to things that are already known, such as origin stories; it is circular and always features the same protagonist, at the same age, with the same mindset. On the contrary, Cutter and his tribe are clearly inscribed in linear time, what Eco calls the "structure of possibility," (Eco 141) a narrative paradigm which allows for change: deaths, births, irretrievable loss and life-changing discovery are what propels the narrative of *Elfquest* forward. Similarly, although their appearance changes very slowly due to their elfin nature, the characters undergo many psychological changes and do indeed change drastically over the course of the books[5].

A visual power fantasy

13 The atypical appearance of Pini's characters is certainly part of what makes *Elfquest* such an outsider in the comics industry. Pini stated in several interviews that her style was derived from two main influences: on the one hand, the graphic idiom of superhero comics (specifically what Neil Cohn calls "kirbyan" (139), after creator Jack Kirby), and on the other hand, the elaborate style that is predominant in *shoujo manga* aimed at young girls.

14 The notion of mixing superheroes and *shoujo* may seem outlandish, for their respective graphic styles are almost diametrically opposed. Superhero comics, as we have seen, form a genre which was predominantly drawn by and for men. It is usually characterised by its kinetic style, emphasizing bodies and the power they stand for. Kirbyan also features sexual dimorphism: men and women have extremely different features and appearances, with an emphasis on sexual characteristics in the case of women. These elements are consistent with a predominantly male, heterosexual readership, constituting what has been called the "male gaze" in feminist critique.

15 On the other hand, *shoujo manga* is created and read mostly by women: its focus is on faces as much as bodies, which are frequently androgynous. The style itself is aestheticised and contemplative; empirically, it is designed to appeal to young girls and women. From Pini's Western point of view, comics convey a sense of "otherness." In an interview, she says that "their heroes, heroines, and, frequently, their villains have an idealised, mask-like, androgynous beauty," (Fletcher n.p.) and goes on to praise the fascination that arises from "sexual ambiguity" in oriental tradition.

16 Pini's style is therefore based on a deliberate strategy of hybridisation, where manga influences are meant to balance out the "macho" style (Fletcher n.p.) of superhero comics. Her elves, regardless of gender, have perfectly muscled bodies, fit for their frequent battles which are depicted with much dynamism; they look young and attractive, and their power invites identification. Because the characters possess more than a hint of sexiness, there are also passages which depict them as objects of (visual) desire, in a way consistent with the conventional treatment of females in superhero comics. But in *Elfquest*, both sexes are indiscriminately shown in elaborate poses and attitudes, sometimes semi-naked or nude, when the plot requires it (see for example Skywise's depiction in the short story "The Heart's Way" p. 3). In this regard, the data collected by Russell shows that the proportion of males to females shown nude is approximately 50/50. (Russel 22)

17 Yet the influence of manga is also clearly visible through Pini's expressive faces, which are often androgynous, with neotenic proportions. A number of elements such as the large eyes, luxuriant hair and general frailty of the characters, who are much smaller than humans, may be seen as a way to move the emphasis away from physical strength, allowing young girls and women to relate more easily to the elves. Therefore, it seems that manga elements are used by Pini as a way to balance out the Western tradition, creating characters to which readers of any age or gender can identify[6].

Narrative treatment of gender roles

18 Let us now consider gender roles and the way they are dramatised. The star couple of the series, Leetah and Cutter, may appear stereotypical at first sight: she is a healer who refuses to fight, while he is an able swordsman leading his tribe into battle. However, the act of healing is frequently presented as another form of battle, fought on a different level. For example, during the war waged against the trolls, most warriors (of both sexes) depart, while Leetah is left alone to try and bring back to life a tribe member (*Elfquest* 18;31). She is depicted in a narrow vertical panel, which echoes the horizontal group picture of the warriors: the layout gives the impression that, although severed from the rest, she is still part of the group. The narrative box also reinforces this impression

through the use of metaphor, stating that "her own private *battle* begins" (my italics), and through the insistence on the knife that she needs in order to open the sheath surrounding the body. This passage is framed as a battle against death itself, and suggests the extent of her healing powers, which can not only preserve life but perhaps also try to reclaim it. The importance given to the practice of magic can, once again, be seen as a strategic shift away from physical strength, which may allow some girls to identify more easily with the narrative situation.

19 Moreover, Cutter and Leetah's relationship is also grounded in a subversion of heterosexual violence against women, for their first encounter is played out as a parody of the stereotypical "rapt of the helpless female". In the second issue of the comics, the Wolfriders are exhausted and traumatised after their three-day forced walk across the desert; a half-starved Cutter rides into the village intending to steal some water for his tribe and, mesmerised by Leetah's beauty, he carries her away instead (*Elfquest* 2;16). However, he turns out to be comically inept at keeping his fierce prisoner (2;21), and swiftly asks for forgiveness once it has been made clear that the two tribes mean no harm to each other. The whole passage is framed as a meditation on the need to communicate instead of trying to take things by force. Never is there any harm done to the female character. More broadly, although the series features many scenes of battle and sometimes implies torture, the absence of sexual violence against women throughout the story[7] certainly contributes to creating a safe environment for female readers, where trauma is not the reason propelling a character forward, as is so often the case in other mature narratives.

20 What is more, Cutter and Leetah are surrounded and balanced out by other characters who defy gender expectations, the canonical example being the couple formed by Nightfall and Redlance, where she is the fighter, while he would rather take care of plants and children. One episode is particularly significant in this regard: at one point, Redlance is left to watch over the tribe's children, while the rest of the elves has to wage war on assailants. However, his hideout is invaded, and Redlance is forced to fight in order to protect the children. Upon returning, the others find him shell-shocked and Nightfall tries to soothe him by promising: "*Let me wash you clean of [...] deeds you should never have had to do!* I *am the sword, the spear, the arrow.* You *are the flower, the tree, the vine! Never will I, or anyone, force you to be other than what you are!* [*Elquest* 20;4]". The ternary rhythm, repeated twice, imbues the speech with incantatory force, driving Nightfall's point home: a person's identity ("what you are") is not predicated on gender, and a man should never be forced to perform stereotypical masculinity if that is not what he wants.

21 Incidentally, the story begins with a subversion of the "damsel in distress" trope, for it is Redlance who needs to be rescued after having been captured by humans (*Elfquest* 1). Actually, the data collected by Russel shows that overall, two thirds of the characters who are being rescued in the narrative are males (Russel 23). Pini therefore uses her sci-fi/fantasy world to conjure up a society where there is less prejudice, and where task division is not predicated on gender but rather on individual tastes and abilities. The predominance of individual choice over social conventions is also visible in Pini's depiction of gender and sexuality.

Gender and sexuality

22 Gender codes in *Elfquest* are more fluid than in our world, and so is sexuality in general: the elves do not have an equivalent of marriage, and exclusivity is purely a matter of individual choice (sex and reproduction are also decorrelated). Furthermore, the fantasy setting allows Pini to reconfigure the words used to speak of love and sex: the characters have their own lexicon, and talk of "lovemates", "lifemates" or "soulmates" to assess their degree of proximity. The Pinis insist that none of these relationships is limited to two people, or to people of different genders.

23 In an interview, it is also made explicit that "Morally, they don't follow the same rules we do; they're pan-sexual, not hung-up on taboos." [Fletcher n.p.] However, since the series is intended to remain "family-friendly", and therefore accessible to children as well as adults, there are no explicit representations of the sexual act, and the heterosexual model remains largely dominant. Thus the subversive dimension is pushed to the background, but adult readers will easily find it there; overall, the comics' outlook to sexuality is overwhelmingly positive and celebrates consent, tenderness and the acceptance of diversity.

24 Although the main character of the story is deeply attached to his lifemate Leetah, with whom he has two children, this heterosexual model is destabilised by the ambiguous relationship between Cutter and his sidekick Skywise. Pini makes it clear that the two are deeply bonded. In the folklore of the series, the most intimate link there can be between two people is the exchange of their secret "soul names," which embody the very essence of a person; Cutter and Skywise have known each other's soul names since they were teenagers. Their relationship is consistently shown to be one of deep love and care; moreover, they share more than a hint of physical intimacy although they both have relationships with women. In the *In All But Blood* spinoff, Skywise uses the following metaphor: "male wolves mount each other for sport, it's true... But I prefer what maidens have," (57) thus confirming that his heterosexual tastes are not incompatible with occasional intercourse with men, and specifically with Cutter.

25 Finally, gender stereotypes are explicitly addressed in the narrative and dramatised as ignorant prejudice that must be overcome. A good example would be when Leetah, who is from a peaceful desert tribe, asks Wolfrider Dewshine not to go hunt, because as a female she seems too frail and unfit for the task (*Elfquest* 5;12). This is particularly jarring given the fact that Leetah has been consistently established before as a self-driven character who will not let other people make decisions for her (a good example being her rebuke of Rayek's telling her that he "forbids her" to go help the Wolfriders, because it is dangerous [*Elfquest* 2;26]).

26 Thus, in the discussion that ensues between Leetah and Dewshine, it becomes obvious that what Leetah hastily assigns to gender (women should not take risks) is in fact a cultural construct (the Sun Folk in general are adverse to risk). Moreover, the narrative voice sides with Dewshine, insisting that even though she does eventually get hurt during the hunt, she is "not a child but a Wolfrider, free to run and hunt with the pack as she chooses" (*Elfquest* 5;23).

27 This episode is particularly interesting in the sense that it involves two women, both of whom are strong, positive characters. Leetah herself has established early in the

narrative that she cannot be controlled or pushed into a relationship against her will; the fact that she, of all people, should have to deal with her own prejudices, reflects the complexity of feminist issues and the debate they trigger even within feminist communities. Therefore, the women are never pitted collectively against the men, but are instead made to voice a diversity of opinions, discuss them among themselves, and occasionally revise their judgment. Thus, *Elfquest* is presented as a truly polyphonic work, favouring diversity.

Birth-giving and parenthood

28 A good example would be the polyphonic treatment of birth and motherhood which is developed by the Pinis. In the diegesis, births are a crucial event because the elves' fertility is very low. But more interestingly, the series frequently features mothers in the act of giving birth,[8] thus expressing a diversity of approaches to female bodies and female experience.

29 The first newborns of the series are Leetah's twins, Amber and Suntop (*Elfquest* 6;8). Their birth constitutes the culmination of the story arc dealing with Cutter and Leetah's romance, and is presented as an analepsis, which creates added suspense as to how and when the twins were born. The passage does not actually focus on the moment of birth but rather on the cultural clash that surrounds it. While the Sun Folk's custom is to leave the mother alone with the midwife, Cutter insists on being at Leetah's side, and she also desires his presence. Faced with a refusal, he is led, uncharacteristically, to draw his blade on the midwife, a threatening act which reflects his initial impulsiveness, and is only partially attenuated by the humorous treatment of their attitudes in this quasi-silent panel. He enters, and the next panel shows the two lovers sharing the same speech balloon, which conveys the union between the two of them, and through them, of their respective tribes. Cutter's ability to move in and out of the hut is symbolic of this cultural rift being bridged, because the Sun Folk were previously shown to live indoors, while the Wolfriders dwelt in caves outside their town. Thus birth-giving becomes a locus of reunion and acceptance of the other, and this integration is made manifest through the birth of the twins, a girl and a boy who each share features of the two tribes.

30 More recently, in the latest instalments of the series, Leetah helps her foster daughter Shuna, a human, to give birth to her own child (*Final Quest* 1;2). The episode is treated as an echo of this initial birth scene, and sheds new light on it, since Leetah is now a more mature character. This time, the presence of the father is actively refused by Shuna who wishes to follow her custom, and seeks instead the presence of female friends. Her human body is represented as far less idealised than the elves', emphasizing the physicality and suffering of her condition. The psychological anxieties of motherhood are also developed and act as a call back to Leetah's own pregnancy; like Shuna, Leetah once feared for her freedom, and worried about her ability to raise a child. On a more subtle level, the passage suggests a meditation on personal choice as Leetah tries to impose her healing on her foster daughter, who refuses her help, showing her that good intentions do not give one the right to interfere with a woman's feelings and wishes regarding her own body.

31 In other cases, the child who is born literally embodies the will of the mother; so it is with Kahvi, chieftess of a Northern tribe, as she gives birth to the daughter of Rayek, a former lover who turned against her (*Siege at Blue Mountain* 4;1). The daughter is destined to live on after Kahvi is dead, and to perpetuate her desire to put an end to Rayek's world-

threatening ambitions. Becoming a mother is an act of defiance for this warrior character; the emphasis is purely on her, and on the heroism she displays as she gives birth without a midwife, surrounded by her male warriors. The drawings convey Kahvi's pain through the two initial close-ups on her face, but they also show her victorious, standing up in front of her baby, and stating "That answers that," a sentence suggesting that this birth is a form of retaliation against Rayek. All these elements show that there is no incompatibility between Kahvi's maternity and her role as a war leader. Thus, the character goes beyond the role of the passive victim and supports the reading of birth-giving as a display of power.

32 All these scenes portray different ways of engaging with an essentially feminine activity, without implying that motherhood is the only purpose of a woman's life (the Pinis themselves having chosen to prioritise their joint career over raising children). Different approaches coexist, but the final decision is always up to the woman concerned. This diversity fits the general moral implied in the comic; that enlightened individual choice must prevail over prejudice and restrictive cultural codes. The comic embraces diversity and acceptance. It displays a form of cultural feminism which is quietly militant; this makes the work suitable for different age and gender groups, but it also downplays the importance of the comic on the feminist critical scene in favour of creators with more explicit views and themes.

Conclusion

33 The series reappraises qualities seen as "typically feminine" by placing them at the center of the elves' lifestyle: community, family, animality, sexuality, but also physical beauty, mannerism and a certain dose of mysticism are endowed with positive value. Moreover, typically female activities are presented as acts of power in their own right.

34 It could be argued, therefore, that *Elfquest* is rooted in a non-radical brand of feminism, one which is closer to the cultural feminist approach, but which also welcomes male readers. Traditional feminine characteristics are revisited and infused with a new sense of personal freedom. The Pinis refrain from passing judgment by developing a large cast of characters with different interests and sensitivities, defending individual free will while also putting forward the importance of community and tolerance.

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NOTES

1. Originally at least. Due to the series' success, the Pinis occasionally delegated ink and lettering work to other artists. Moreover, a number of spinoffs are not drawn by Pini herself.
2. In this article, I shall provide in-text reference to the online comics as follows: (story arc, issue number; page number).
3. My emphasis. The quotation is taken from the book's abstract featured on the publisher's website : http://www.salempress.com/press_titles.html?book=251.
4. Obviously, Eco's analysis does not take into account "revisionist" superhero narratives such as Alan Moore's and Frank Miller's, which precisely sought to place the superhero within a "realistic" timeframe.
5. It is true that the story has not yet reached a definite end, and that its episodic nature produces a sprawling narrative, full of one-shots and spinoffs. In that sense, *Elfquest* is rhizomatic rather than linear. In any case, however, there is always a clear sense of temporality, with situations and characters constantly evolving.
6. As we shall see later on, *Elfquest* is a book for all ages. It features mature themes and character development, but much is implied rather than shown or told straight away, making it suitable for children. In keeping with this, the original comic was marketed at a modest price that children could afford, but whose size (larger than a regular comic book[Costain]) and absence of colour implied an adult target readership.
7. There is, however, one instance of sexual abuse perpetrated by villainous Winnowill (female) on Rayek (male). Images alone do not suggest lack of consent, but the narrative box which provides internal focalisation on the thoughts of Clearbrook, who witnesses the scene, shocked at what she terms "a violation – such callous manipulation of another's needs and weaknesses." (S*iege at Blue Mountain* 7;5)
8. Non-exhaustive list: birth of Amber and Suntop (*Elfquest* 6;8), of Venka (*Siege at Blue Moutain* 4;1), of Tyleet (*Kings of the Broken Wheel* 7;10), of Shukopek (*Final Quest* 1;2), and finally of Korafay (*Final Quest* 1;21).

ABSTRACTS

Elfquest made history as one of the first successful alternative comics of the late 1970s. It is set apart by its large female readership, its non-superheroic themes and the unusual graphic style of its author, Wendy Pini. However, *Elfquest* has drawn very little attention among gender critics, who prefer to devote their efforts to openly subversive material.
In this paper, I argue that *Elfquest* is in fact a halfway house between the mainstream comics tradition and the all-out radicalism of the feminist underground. The series can be read as a mixed power fantasy which combines Kirby's graphic heritage with Eastern influences, thus creating strong characters whose appearance resonates with female tastes and experience.
In a move reminiscent of cultural feminism, the series reappraises traditionally feminine values; yet it is never essentialist. Pini's fantasy narrative creates a safe space for female readers and affirms the importance of tolerance, solidarity, and individual freedom.

Elfquest, l'un des premiers comics alternatifs de la fin des années 1970, se distingue par son lectorat largement féminin, ses thématiques typiques de la *fantasy* et le style graphique inhabituel de son auteure, Wendi Pini. Cependant, *Elfquest* reste peu étudié par la critique féministe, laquelle se concentre sur des créatrices ouvertement subversives.
Nous suggérons qu'*Elfquest* constitue un compromis entre la tradition superhéroïque et le radicalisme des auteur.e.s underground. Graphiquement, la série doit autant à Jack Kirby qu'à la bande dessinée orientale, et met en scène des personnages forts et aventureux, mais dont l'apparence résonne avec les goûts et préoccupations des lectrices, permettant l'identification de l'ensemble du lectorat.
Dans la lignée du féminisme culturel, *Elfquest* revalorise les éléments traditionnellement liés à la féminité sans pour autant tomber dans l'essentialisme, car le récit affirme l'importance de la liberté individuelle, du dialogue et de la tolérance.

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Keywords: Elfquest, women, comics, fantasy, gender, representation
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